

## Too Young to Vote?

In September 2014, the people of Scotland held a referendum: Asked to decide whether to become an independent country or remain part of the United Kingdom, they chose the latter. Among the 3.6 million voters who participated in this decision were more than 100,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 17, who were allowed to vote on this question.<sup>1</sup>

In June 2015, the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed a bill to secure voting rights for 16 and 17 year olds in all local and Scottish elections. However, these young people will not be able to participate in other UK elections or referenda, as only those aged 18 and above are eligible to vote in such elections.

Scotland is not alone in extending voting rights to some citizens under 18. Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, and Nicaragua allow citizens as young as 16 to vote in national elections. 16 year olds are also allowed to vote in local elections in some areas of Germany, Israel, and Norway. Even two cities in the United States—Takoma Park and Hyattsville, MD—have lowered the voting age to 16 for local elections.<sup>2</sup> Youth activists in other communities, in the U.S. and elsewhere, have also urged their lawmakers to lower the voting age to 16.

Proponents of lowering the voting age argue that because minors are subject to the laws and are directly affected by political decisions, they should have a voice in determining those laws. In the U.S., many 16 and 17 year olds have jobs and pay taxes, and can often be tried as adults in criminal proceedings. Moreover, some claim that it is unfair that those who are 18 at a time of a presidential election will be able to vote, while those who are only a few days or weeks younger will not be allowed to do so for four years. Finally, some claim that allowing people to vote before adulthood would promote important democratic virtues at a younger age, and increase the likelihood that these voters will remain politically and socially engaged citizens. This would not only increase civic participation of young adults (between 18 and 25) who traditionally vote at far lower rates than older citizens, but also would promote a more participatory democracy overall.

Others argue that lowering the voting age is a bad idea. They worry that voting is too great a responsibility to entrust to minors—especially on matters of great national importance. Not only are 16 and 17 year olds less mature, these people contend, but also teenagers frequently lack the political knowledge, life experience, and independence needed to make wise political decisions. Although defenders of the status quo concede that young people are affected by political decisions, they argue that it is the parents' responsibility to take their children's interests into account when voting. Finally, some claim that lowering the voting age is the first step on a slippery slope: If 16 year olds are allowed to vote, why not 15 or 14 or 10 year olds?

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is the right to vote important?
2. What qualities are important for voting responsibly? Why are those qualities important?
3. Should the right to vote depend only on whether or not a person can vote responsibly, or should it also depend on factors such as whether or not a person is affected by the election, or would benefit from the experience of voting?
4. What are some major differences between adults and minors? Do these differences justify allowing only adults to vote?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/29279384/scottish-referendum-how-first-vote-went-for-1617-year-olds>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/10/us/politics/students-in-maryland-test-civic-participation-and-win-right-to-vote.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/10/us/politics/students-in-maryland-test-civic-participation-and-win-right-to-vote.html?_r=0)